Book Reviews

Karabanow, J., Carson, A., & Clement, P. (2010). Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian

Youth. Winnipeg: Fernwood Press.

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Karanbow, Carson, and Clement's "Leaving the streets: Stories of Canadian youth" is an exploration of homelessness among sixteen to twenty-four year olds across Canada, particularly of the various factors that influence exiting street life and the process involved in doing so. Through intimate conversations with street youth across Canada, the authors "share their stories of struggle, their need for acceptance, and finally their need for stability and care" (p. 15). 128 youth and fifty service providers from six Canadian cities (Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver) are included in the study and provide the reader not only with an understanding of street disengagement but also with street culture in general. From their insights, it becomes evident that life on the streets is far more complex than many people realize.

Honest quotes coupled with hand-drawn sketches from street youth themselves give the book a very realistic and somewhat poetic quality. Rather than keeping the youth anonymous, the authors have chosen to attach the individual's name, age, and city to their quotes, though some do use pseudonyms. I believe they have done this to create a more personal connection with readers. It allows them to see these youth as individuals with personal struggles and triumphs rather than lumped together as part of a widely unknown population. Throughout the book, attention is drawn to the fact that while they all share many common difficulties, street youth come from different backgrounds and each have unique struggles.

Karabanow et al. describe the exiting process for the majority of street youth as consisting of layers or dimensions that are neither mutually exclusive nor sequential. Youth may transition between layers in either direction before successfully exiting the streets. These layers are as follows: (1) precipitating factors, (2) courage to change, (3) securing help, (4) transitioning from the street, (5) change in routine, and (6) successful exiting. The youth interviewed throughout the book are at various stages on their journey but all seem to closely follow this pattern of transitions. It is interesting to see how self-identities are transformed throughout the process and how each stage impacts the youth involved.

The authors' first dimension, precipitating factors, refers to those things that influence youth to consider exiting street life. In general, the authors say, "street youth re-assess their street careers in the face of traumatic street experiences, their disenchantment with street culture and/or grim boredom with street survival activities" (p. 13). There are numerous other reasons youth may contemplate leaving street life, but these are the most common motivations. While these factors are crucial to the exiting process, Karabanow et al. note that "contemplation over disengaging from street life is only the first step in a long and difficult exiting process and most youth revisit this stage several times before succeeding" (p. 25). One key aspect of this dimension is that it demands varying degrees of courage. The decision must come from within the youth themselves, whether it is triggered by an external factor or not. This insight has important implications for social workers or others dealing with homelessness.

Once youth have reached this stage, they can use their new found courage to actually make a change in their lives. The authors describe the second dimension as "heightened through increased responsibilities such as becoming pregnant or having an intimate partner, gaining support from family and friends, having an awareness that one is cared for, and building personal

motivation and commitment towards changing one's circumstances" (p. 13). Support was found through various sources such as religious groups or services, Alcoholics Anonymous, and family members. Karabanow et al. found that having strong support systems was positively correlated with demonstrating fewer struggles with street disengagement. Another important aspect is that these systems often intersect – an example the authors give is that those with a strong desire to exit street life may also be more willing to seek help to get them there. Karabanow et al. discuss the French term "*entouré*" which roughly translates to "encircled" or "surrounded" (p. 52); they note that it surfaced many times among the participants from Montreal, but the sentiment was common across the country, meaning that it is an important aspect of street disengagement.

Even when youth have necessary support and motivation, there are many barriers they still must overcome. The third layer includes using available services, searching for employment and housing, as well as engaging with a formal institution, such as school. Karabanow et al. discuss the problems with high costs of living and the difficulties of actually finding employment. Factors associated with living on the streets from a young age such as low literacy and numeracy skills also negatively affect youth's chances of finding employment and housing. The authors report that many street youths also face discrimination. This dimension speaks volumes about structural barriers within society than can impede the transition off the streets for many youths. This information may be particularly useful for those who work in social services or who organize youth programming.

The fourth layer addresses transitioning away from the street into mainstream culture and society. Karabanow et al. describe this stage of street disengagement to be very complex and difficult for the youth. Making the transition into conventional society often entails leaving friends and culture behind, getting off drugs, and constructing or reconstructing social worlds

and relationships, and many youths reported missing street life during this phase. This is helpful

to the reader in better understanding the complexities surrounding homelessness and how

difficult it is to transition away from life on the streets. The authors note that this important

transition requires both dedication and hard work, as well as learning many new life skills, but

they also found it to be associated with increased self-esteem.

Karabanow et al. describe layer five as a stage of restructuring routines, planning for the

future, and acquiring some form of social assistance throughout the transition. While difficult,

there are several positive outcomes that result from this dimension.

> Participants described the physical and psychological shifts occurring in their
> lives, such as sleeping better, feeling healthier and experiencing increased self-
> esteem and self-confidence. Such changes tended to be linked to young people
> having greater stability and consistency in their lives. (p. 107)

According to the authors, stable employment seemed to be the most consequential change at this

stage. Finding a new sense of belonging after street disengagement is also a crucial component of

the process, but many youths expressed that it was just as challenging as leaving the streets. One

participant recalled "feeling like you don't belong anywhere. Finding people like you that

understand… Positive reinforcement to stay off the street is needed" (p. 106). Karabanow et al.

also note that breaking ties – with friends, agencies and services, etc. – is another important

aspect of the transition away from street life.

The final layer is termed "successful exiting" and the authors' consider it to be somewhat

of an elusive concept because it encompasses both objective and subjective components, which

tend to be interrelated. "Success" is unique to each individual, and the authors found that there

seemed to be varying degrees of success in relation to street exiting. Almost all ex-street

participants agreed that objective, tangible success involves "stable housing, a return to

employment and/or school, and a move away from street culture" (p. 115). The more subjective,

intangible ideas of success include notions of spiritual and emotional growth as well as a feeling of stability. A service provider contributes,

> I mean, we [the service] don't really gauge [a youth's] success if they get off the street, we gauge it on how they grow in their relationship to how they see themselves and how their self-worth can grow. (p. 115)

The authors add that a sense of being in control and having direction in life are essential aspects. Most of the individuals who had achieved this spoke of feeling proud of themselves and that they were able to finally enjoy their lives more fully.

Karabanow, Carson, and Clement's book accomplishes several goals. First and foremost, it paints a picture of homelessness across the country and sheds light on its unique street culture and the individuals involved. Beginning with entering the streets and ending with successfully exiting street life, it takes you on a literary journey alongside these young people. Hearing directly from the street youth themselves provides a significant and insightful perspective for the reader and aids in understanding the challenges faced by the homeless. Intertwined with hope and despair, I found "Leaving the streets" to be informative, easy to read, and rather eye-opening. Karabanow et al.'s intended readers are primarily social workers, counselors, and the families of street youth. Others that may also benefit from the information in this book are post-secondary students and researchers – particularly in sociology, but relevant disciplines may also include economics, political science, anthropology, women's studies, or any others dealing with topics such as youth, homelessness, and social services.